

YEOVIL TOWN SUPPORTERS SOCIETY LIMITED (Glovers Trust)

22.5.21

Councillor John Clark, Chief Executive Alex Parmley
South Somerset District Council
The Council Offices
Brympton Way
Yeovil
BA20 2HT

Dear Councillor Clark, Mr Parmley

Purchase of Yeovil Town FC

You will be aware that South Somerset District Council at its meeting of December 2020 agreed to purchase Yeovil Town Football Club Ground. The decision meant that the community group who had placed two Assets of Community Value (The Glover's Trust) on the assets were able to activate a six-month moratorium to consider the purchase of the assets. This six-month period ends on 26th May, and whilst the Glover's Trust is not in a position to purchase the Club, the moratorium period has provided us with the opportunity to look at the detail of the proposed purchase, and as a result we write formally to ask South Somerset District Council to review the decision.

It is our view that considerations have changed substantially since December and some of the imperatives that prompted the decision have changed.

The report presented to Members in December 2020 made reference to the parlous state of the Club's finances; with the report stating the Chairman of the Club reported that the club will "run out of money by Christmas 20" Here we are in May 2021 with the Club still operating, so clearly it has been able to make alternative financial arrangements. I'm sure you are aware part of this includes a loan from Sport England who now become a creditor. It is likely therefore that funds generated from the sale of the club will go to pay off debts and covenants that currently prevent development.

The protection offered to SSDC is via the commercial value of the club's land asset, and a commercial rent on lease back to the Club. Whilst we are not privy to the financial calculations, a straight housing led development of the site is far from straightforward.

Should the two "top pitches" be put forward for development and not be re-provided elsewhere Sport England will object to a planning application. Any loss of the pitches would also be contrary to South Somerset's own Local Plan which seeks to preserve existing sports pitches.

Secondly any plan to develop on the existing car park will mean the only car parking then available on site being a small number of spaces around the "core" which are currently used for VIP's players and visitors. The loss of the car park will on busy match days mean that the streets including the nearby residential streets will be used by spectators attending the games. Without a clear and robust alternative car parking strategy, or a public transport strategy, it is likely that this will be an area of considerable concern to local residents, businesses and SSDC's own Planning Department.

Members will know that sites that have been classified as Assets of Community Value are a Material Consideration if a planning application is put forward for the development of that asset. This requires the applicant to ensure there is no loss of community benefit from a development on the site, or to re-provide in equal measure.

There is also a covenant on the site in favour of the former landowner that will only be lifted on receipt of a negotiated fee.

The process towards achieving planning permission for the site is therefore one that could be long and in parts far from straight forward. We are not aware that the analysis of the capital return to SSDC has taken these complexities into consideration when making the decision to purchase, or consideration given to the number of planning objections that may be received.

Whilst a “core” of the Club has been preserved other aspect of the sale are of concern to us.

The report to Council highlights the Social and Economic importance of the club to the Town and its hinterland. However, the sale and leaseback will see the asset move away from the club and prevent it from determining future use.

It is disingenuous of the Council to claim that it is helping save the club when it is giving with one hand and taking with the other. They club may have a short-term fix, but its long-term effects will be damaging.

Clubs like Yeovil Town need to generate revenue, and the land asset is the club’s treasure that given the right strategy could be sweated to provide an income in addition to match days and sponsorship. Selling and developing for short term gain will harm the Club’s long-term future. Added to this is the lease agreement whereby the club pays a rental on its ground, and the future is looking even more gloomy. With a rental figure 7% of the purchase price, we estimate that the club will pay an annual rental of £140,000. By way of comparison Exeter City pay £40,000 per annum to their City Council for the rent of that ground.

The purchase also states that the Club will benefit from the capital receipts from any sale of parcels of land. We can see no legal framework in place to guarantee long term benefits in this arrangement with the likely benefit to be a reduction in rental.

With the Club confined to the “core” its ability to grow and develop is severely limited, and along with it the contribution that the club can make to the wider economy and community. Add to this the burden of an annual rental then an already marginal Club could be pushed over the edge.

Nor do we believe this deal is a good one for the people of South Somerset. There may be some short-term gain via new housing and capital receipts, but the prize is bigger than that. As custodians of the community, it is surely SSDC’s duty to create sustainable communities. This site offers the opportunity not just to create something for Yeovil Town FC but for the wider locality, providing a focus for the growing community and linking the work areas to the housing, it just takes a bit of vision and a determination to see beyond short term financial gains.

As a supporter’s group we have been working with Architects and Master planners and have begun to construct a vision for the site, one that would make the site a destination through the working week as well as weekends, and that would be based around health and well being as well as commercial and housing developments. We believe it is possible to do all of these things.

Whilst the deal with South Somerset District Council may provide both the Club and SSDC with a capital receipt once the site has been developed out there will be little long-term benefit to the area or the Local Authority, whilst the football club will be saddled with a repayment lease on its own ground and few means of generating income.

We believe there is a better more sustainable solution and as the Local Authority we would implore you to take a longer-term view of the site, and work with us to develop this.

As an Authority you have articulated the importance of the Club to the town and the surrounding area. It is after all the largest cultural institution in the area. As custodians of the public good we urge you to reconsider the decision to purchase the club and its asset, as we firmly believe that the current deal is not in the interest of the club or the local community that you serve.

Yours sincerely,

Brendon Owen
Chair Glover's Trust Board.

CC Clare Pestell

Email addresses

John.clark@southsomerset.gov.uk

Alex.parmley@southsomerset.gov.uk

Clare.pestell@southsomerset.gov.uk